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EDITORIAL

A FUTURE WITH WATER

Desalting must be done sensitively and frugally.

Monday, July 17, 2006 - Columnist Daniel Weintraub on the facing Comment page describes how an Orange County experiment with slant-drilling could bypass environmental worries and make it possible to desalinate sea water without harming sea creatures. The bigger problem, though, is cost.

That happens to be the subject of research in Long Beach, where the city's Water Department already has a demonstration plant up and running, pumping out 300,000 gallons of salt-free water a day with a new technique that uses less electricity.

Long Beach's new method was developed at the Water Department by one of its administrators, Diem Vuong, now retired.

The Long Beach plant is purely a research project, and none of its desalinated product actually goes into the water system. If the system proves to be technically and economically viable, which seems likely, the department would build a much bigger facility, able to produce 10 million gallons of potable water a day.

These projects probably will prove vital to Southern Californians, who, although they are the nation's least wasteful users of water, sooner or later will run short of it. Making salt water drinkable is the most palatable way to avert shortages, but only if costs are manageable and environmental damage minimal.

Orange County's technique avoids sucking up sea animals and killing them by putting an intake pipe underground and using the sandy ocean floor as a filter. Long Beach's technique uses a two-pass, lower-pressure process of forcing salt water through membranes to produce mineral-free water.

Put those two concepts together, and Southern California will have fewer worries about a dry future.